

Bill Cunningham New York

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



The invigorating documentary *Bill Cunningham New York* offers a poignant portrait of a life devoted to the pursuit of beauty. The subject, a photographer who documents New York fashion in his long-running *New York Times* column "On the Street," is both an artist and a social commentator, though far too modest to describe himself as either.

Director Richard Press shoots Cunningham as he bikes cheerily through New York traffic, negotiates galas and openings and snaps women and men *al fresco* whose couture catches his imagination. Cunningham—slender and fit, with a generous smile and a light frosting of white hair—is eternally clad in sky-blue lightweight jackets. He turned 80 during the filming but looks 20 years younger.

Cunningham's influence on fashion is undisputed by the other interviewees, including *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour and *Paper* coeditor Kim Hastreiter. Yet his touch on the corporeal world feels magically light. He occupies a tiny studio in the Carnegie Hall building, where he sleeps on a cot dropped down among filing cabinets; he eats sandwiches and sips coffee in inexpensive eateries when he can take a few moments out from packed days and nights. (He doesn't partake of the spreads at the black-tie events he covers, arguing that to do so would compromise his journalistic integrity.)

In the course of the film, Cunningham and his few remaining neighbors lose their tenancy at Carnegie Hall, which has sold out its artistic legacy and succumbed to the corporate vortex. Hunting for an apartment, he responds to the handsome Manhattan digs his rental agent shows him—graced with spectacular views of Central Park—with a kind of embarrassment, as if he'd been invited to take up residence in Buckingham Palace. He doesn't go to movies or the theater or own a TV, and he stopped attending concerts years ago because he couldn't spare the time. He's never had a romantic relationship, though perhaps hundreds of people—mostly in the fashion world, in both New York and Paris—consider him a friend, and he had a long-term association with Brooke Astor, whom he admired for her generosity and Old World graciousness and photographed over decades.

Cunningham doesn't talk about himself easily; he instinctually deflects curiosity. Most of his friends don't know anything about his background, and the ones Press asks assume he comes from money, presumably because of his tossed-off elegance and sophisticated eye. In fact, he tells Press, he's the scion of a working-class Catholic family that worried his choice of career was unmanly.

The humbleness of his roots is less surprising when you consider that he's a natural democrat. He weaves through the Manhattan aristocracy but remains unaffected by it, and he shoots only what he finds original and striking—the clothes, he insists, never the wearers, who may be celebrities or strangers on the street, diplomats or nannies. His taste is impeccable, his memory precise (he has sometimes exposed famous designers who echo the work of earlier seasons), his appreciative range wide-reaching. According to Wintour, the looks he captures in his column are often months in advance of trends.

Cunningham's ethics are inseparable from his aesthetic: both are determined by his conviction that beauty is where you find it and deserves to be taken on its own merits. He parted company with *Women's Wear Daily*, the first publication that employed him, when his editor threw out his copy and substituted a tongue-in-cheek commentary that sent up the women in his pictures. His eye rejects the phony and the inflated, while his passion for beauty steers him around irony and satire. The purity of his artistic project, his insistence on casting himself as a student of beauty rather than an artist or a tastemaker, the way in which he lives day to day—all this suggests a vision of life that's spiritual rather than existential.

The only element of Cunningham's routine that isn't linked directly to his work is church, and his religious devotion is harder for him to talk about than anything else.

When Press asks him about it, Cunningham pauses so long—his head bent, evidently fighting not to cry—that the filmmaker interjects apologetically that he doesn't have to discuss it. But eventually he does, talking simply about the importance of moral guidance. You come away from this sweet, small movie thinking that for Bill Cunningham, beauty in its infinite variety is God's bounty, and it's his mission to chronicle it—though even to express it in those terms would be a presumption that might sully the gift.